



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Found in Exile: The Lost Ark”

Micah 6:6-8, Luke 4:16-21

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You will hear a reflection given by the prophet Micah who lived before the fall of Jerusalem, and then a reflection given by Jesus who lived eight centuries later. The temple has been re-built and there is a new King of Israel—well, sort of. Herod is a political appointee by Rome. Needless to say, there has been massive change between when Micah and Jesus lived.

Worship has changed too. In Micah’s day, worship is Temple-oriented. In Jesus’ day, it is Temple-based for some and synagogue-based for others. But though worship has changed dramatically, Micah and Jesus say something similar in their reflections.

Let’s hear from Micah:

Micah 6:6-8:

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?



Now let's hear from Jesus, speaking in worship in his hometown of Nazareth:

Luke 4:16-21:

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In museums, you will find fixed displays: paintings on walls, artifacts on pedestals or in display cases, and statues in open spaces. In a transportation museum, you'll find fixed displays as well. What is odd is that the fixed displays are of portable devices.

Transportation is about moving, right? A car rides the road, the train rides the rails, a plane flies overhead, and a rocket blasts into space. Sure, one can imagine what it was like to ride that powder blue 1959 Cadillac Eldorado with the top down or, if you are my age, to see a red classic Schwinn Sting Ray bicycle and remember when you roamed your neighborhood on one. But a Transportation Museum really needs more than fixed displays, doesn't it? Something *needs to move*.

That is why I think it is great that our Transportation Museum makes it possible for the 611, the most modern steam locomotive ever built, to pull vintage passenger cars so folks can experience a transportation exhibit by being... transported. And it is fitting that our Bus Museum offers its vintage buses for public use so that, for instance, members of this church on Picnic Sunday can ride from our parking lot to Braelock in 1950s style.

The kind of questions that the creators of our Transportation museums had to answer about portable objects was a question that needed to be answered centuries ago.

When Hebrew nomads quit wandering and settled down as a nation, they had to answer the question, "[What is to be done with the Ark of the Covenant?](#)" Built for travel, the Ark is the highly decorated chest carried by two poles. It went everywhere the Hebrews went when they wandered without a home. The Ark centered their worship for it reminded them that while they might not have a place to call home, God made a home with them.

The Ark also reminded them of what God expected of them, the kind of people they were called to be. For inside that chest were the two tablets on which were etched the commandments: Keep the Sabbath, honor your elders, don't lie or murder, don't steal another's possessions or spouse. The Ark made clear there is to be a connection



between worship and justice,
between prayer and practice,
between love of God and love of others.

But when the nation of Israel is established with a king to rule it, with borders to defend, with people living in houses and not tents, what is to be done with the portable Ark?

King Solomon comes up with a solution. *Build a Transportation Museum*. Replace the tent that protected the Ark with a stone tent. And place in the very center of that stone tent the ark. Only don't let it be on *public* display. Make the Ark only accessible to priests to invest them with power and authority. Let the message be clear: God, who went everywhere with God's people, is now going nowhere. God's people! God's nation! God's king!

The problem, though, is that an Ark *out of sight* can go *out of mind*. Over the course of Israel's history and its kings, God's presence became more and more assumed while God's demands for justice sometimes became neglected. What about the expectation of those tablets to honor God by loving neighbor?

It turns out that even when the Ark can be hidden *out of sight*, the commandments cannot be kept *out of sound*. The prophets become oracles through whom the justice commands of God find voice.

A classic example of the commandments finding voice is the passage I read from Micah, a passage often used the way we have used it today, as a *Call to Worship*. Speaking to the king and speaking to all those who have resources and power, Micah reminds them that protecting the tablets cannot replace their keeping. Worshipping the God who gave the tablets can't replace serving God. God is rightly worshipped by a people who show justice and love kindness.

In the eight centuries between Micah and Jesus, worship changes dramatically. Our passage from Luke points to that radical change. What I read from Luke tells of the first time Jesus preaches. And look where it happens. Jesus first sermon is not at the re-built Temple in Jerusalem where worship is again conducted under the supervision of priests. It is offered where he grew up in a synagogue.

Synagogue worship is Exile Worship. By that, I do not mean there are no synagogues in Israel. There are plenty of them, and Jesus is standing in one of them. What I mean is that synagogue worship either began or took off¹ after Israel fell to Babylon and the Temple was destroyed. Believe it or not, Exile worship has a lot to do with how we worship today as Presbyterians.

To explain what I mean, I want to take you inside an imaginary *Worship Museum*. It's a crazy idea I know because a Worship Museum would have to be impossibly large to show off something as large as a cathedral and as small as a sweat lodge or a throw rug beside a bed. But please just play along.

¹ Scholars are divided.



I'm your guide and I take you into a display room that contains a typical synagogue of Jesus' day. It could be a house, it could be large or small, but this particular synagogue is vintage. It is like the one excavated in Nazareth and others excavated in small towns. I'll begin my spiel with some context and tell you that when the first Temple was destroyed, and Jews had to figure out how to worship whether they were exiled or left behind in the ruined city.

They gathered in homes at first, and then in buildings like this one on the tour. They had to do among themselves what used to be done far away by priests in the temple. They began to look to those among them who showed the commitment to study and the wisdom to understand the books that were being gathered, edited, and distributed to remind the Jews of their story and identity.

Over time, they looked to Pharisees who were lay scholars, and rabbis whose wisdom invited followers. Their worship did not involve the catharsis of slaughtering animals to pay some kind of price for sin, nor get lost in rituals. The worship focused on the scrolls that contained these writings. Those books were Torah, Prophets, and Writings and were the beginning of what we Christians call the Old Testament.

I'll then go on to say that this worship that was local and centered on sacred texts was the most vital worship the Hebrew people had ever known. I'll give three examples why and, being a guide, I'll be secretly pleased by those taking notes.

First, I say, the Exiles learned again what their slave ancestors learned, that even when you are nobody in the eyes of the world, you are beloved children in the eyes of God.

Second, they learned again the lesson of those ancestors who had escaped from Egypt, nomads who pitched their tent in different places because they did not have a land to call their own. They learned that even if they now live as deportees in Babylon (what is now Iraq), and later even if they did live in far flung towns and cities of the Roman empire, God is with them and can be worshipped where they live.

Third, and finally, they learned one more shocking thing. I'll tell them that as someone who grew up in church, I had a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* kind of view about the Ark—that it contained magical powers and could not be destroyed. But it probably was destroyed along with the Temple. And the Exiles learned that they could worship even without the Ark and without the Ten Commandments carried within it. Because even with the physical tablets lost, the Exiles found that the commandments could be kept anyway. The commandments survive when the people serve justice and show compassion.

Among the Exiles who had experienced injustice and cruelty, justice and compassion became a hope for the future. They anticipated a day of God's realm when the oppressed are freed, the sick are healed, and people live together in shalom. From that day till this, the hope for God's realm to be known everywhere lived alongside, and often in tension with, the nation of Israel to be restored. Sure, some exiles longed for the day when they could return to the homeland. But the extraordinary spiritual discovery in exile was actually the rediscovery of what Micah was talking about. God's kingdom comes when we are humble before God in worship doing justice and showing kindness wherever we are. God was never just in Israel. God is in the world. To find God, just look for where justice and kindness are happening.



As a guide, I know that some folks are anxious to move on to the next exhibit everyone is talking about, the recreation of a cave of a mountainside monastery. So, I wrap things up by saying this:

Imagine this synagogue is the one in Nazareth where Jesus gives his first sermon. He speaks to people who hear sometimes that they need to make a pilgrimage to see the Temple built by Rome's appointee, Herod the Great. Jesus says, "You know what? What you are looking for is right here, right now. The Spirit of the Lord that moved with the Ark is present in me here in this town of Nazareth so far removed from Jerusalem. And you know why? Because through me good news will be brought to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed."

I'll stop being a tour guide now (they didn't pay me enough anyway). Today, I stand before you as a pastor asking you to consider where we are as people gathered in person or virtually to worship at Second Presbyterian Church. Today is the Sunday when we consider the nature of the life and witness of this community of faith.

You have available to you the Annual Report which gives a broad view. Later in our Annual meeting, you'll hear about the church's finances and staff.

I'll close this sermon by saying something about our worship

We have *beautiful* church facilities. I'm glad we do because they house worship and the activities of an active community of faith. I'm glad also that in the span of time that all of us have worshipped here there has been no debt, any construction and renovation has been paid for outside pledged giving, that we have a maintenance fund that helps your giving go more to programs and missions.

That said, our buildings were lost to us for a while. We entered a kind of Exile where many of us, and for a while all of us, worshipped in homes (or maybe on walks or in cars). Worship changed. When we had communion, you had to come up with your own bread and drink. When we had an ordination, elders raised hands where they were instead of placing their hands on the heads and shoulders of those being ordained. When we bowed our heads to pray, it was when someone on a screen called us to do so. We had memorial services where no one came but were well attended. Then, this past year when we opened up the buildings again, some sat in pews, and some sat before their screens.

Worship changed. But we found ways to keep the justice and compassion commands of the tablets, didn't we? We increased support for efforts to help those in crisis, we kept addressing important issues like racism, and we found new ways to tend to the sick, dying, and grieving. We even conducted an enormous financial campaign where all of it went for efforts to answer Micah's call.

I think it is no secret how much I love this church and am proud of it. I know that we as individuals and we as a congregation can do better to live into the vision Micah and Jesus shared of God's realm being made known in the world around us. Honestly, though, my intent is not to sound like that parent whose child can do no wrong, but to raise up something important that a lot



of us were reminded of by living it. Being a body of Christ can't about buildings without ministry or rituals without meaning. And it can never be worship without love.

So, no matter the circumstances, and no matter whether we are together or apart, true worship means finding ways to remain open to the Spirit of the Lord being upon us, and responding with the worship of our hearts, and the commandment-keeping of our lives. True worship doesn't mean leaving it to the professionals but finding each other so that together we can do justice, love kindness while walking humbly with God.

